



## Race and the Family Romance: Whitman's Civil War

George Hutchinson

ISSN 0737-0679 (Print)

ISSN 2153-3695 (Online)

Copyright © 2003 George Hutchinson

---

### Recommended Citation

Hutchinson, George. "Race and the Family Romance: Whitman's Civil War." *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 20 (Winter 2003), 134-150. <https://doi.org/10.13008/2153-3695.1709>

This Essay is brought to you for free and open access by Iowa Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* by an authorized administrator of Iowa Research Online. For more information, please contact [lib-ir@uiowa.edu](mailto:lib-ir@uiowa.edu).

## RACE AND THE FAMILY ROMANCE: WHITMAN'S CIVIL WAR

GEORGE HUTCHINSON

---

WHITMAN OFTEN spoke of the importance of the Civil War to *Leaves of Grass*. He told his disciple Horace Traubel in his later years that it was "the very centre, circumference, *umbilicus*, of [his] whole career."<sup>1</sup> In the poem "To Thee Old Cause," he wrote, "My book and the war are one"; and elsewhere he wrote that his poems turned on the war as a wheel on its axle.<sup>2</sup> What Whitman liked to call the "Four Years War" indeed represented for the poet a pivotal event in universal history, a sacred conflict between democracy and its internal as well as external antagonists. It proved his poetry's validity and anchored his personal history, with all its private anguish, to the public life of the nation.

I would like to examine the implications of Whitman's experience of the Civil War as a familial tragedy, remembering Whitman as a member of a white, New York working-class family that was experiencing continuous trauma throughout the war years, even as Whitman immersed himself in the trauma of the Union hospitals in Washington and developed surrogate family relationships there. Familial metaphors pervade his written responses to the War—indeed, some of his most moving (and neglected) writing of the period can be found in letters to his own family, or to the families of sick and dying soldiers. I will try to weave together Whitman's response to the Civil War as one of the "common people" directly affected by it, his wartime correspondence, and his striking transformation of the poetry of war into a poetry of primary relationships, attachment and loss. I will then suggest that one chief reason Whitman leaves the relation of African Americans to the Civil War almost entirely unspoken, unrepresentable, is that they do not belong to the national "family" Whitman imagined and addressed. Relegated to the periphery of Whitman's imagination, they become a repressed element, uncanny, a source of dread. A peculiar correspondence arises between his inability to question the "meaning" he ascribed to the Civil War as the birth of American democracy and his inability to face squarely the issue of African Americans' relationship to it, to his own identity. In his and the nation's process of recovery from the trauma of war, much was left unspoken, undiagnosed, and unhealed in the heart of the democratic experiment.

It is difficult to understand Whitman's response to the war without understanding both his despair for the country before hostilities broke out and the depth of his attachment to the idea of American nationhood. Whitman believed the causes of the war lay not in Southern secessionism alone but rather in lingering "feudal" elements and corruption that infected both the South and the North. Hence, like Lincoln, Whitman viewed it as a war within one identity. Moreover, this identity was, for Whitman, shaped to a great degree by a kind of national family romance, in relation to the Founding Fathers, that had extraordinary resonance in his poetic imagination.<sup>3</sup> Two of his brothers, after all, were named George Washington and Thomas Jefferson Whitman. As a youth Walt was always eager to hear about Revolutionary War days, and in his earliest journalism he participated in the intense idealization of figures like Washington and Jefferson, holding them up as paternal models to American youth.

An exaggerated sentimentality pervades Whitman's references to Washington, in which the general appears as a sensitive parent spreading his mantle of love over the American people and particularly the young "sons" given over by families to his care in the Revolutionary War. In "The Sleepers" of 1855, for example, Washington "cannot repress the weeping drops" at the sight of his soldiers dying in battle at Brooklyn (Whitman's home town): "He sees the slaughter of the southern braves confided to him by their parents."<sup>4</sup> The poet sets the scene from the nation's family history against a backdrop of his native landscape; drawing attention to the sacrifice of "southern braves," he implicitly strives to stave off the growing schism in the "American" family of his own day. He redirects the emotional current inherent in the suffering of sons toward affirmation of "family" bonds—a feature we will find central to his later writing on the Civil War. Whitman repeatedly portrays the Revolutionary hero as a father or elder companion—a role he would later carve out for himself in relation to the young soldiers of the Civil War. Just so, he came to see the Civil War as superseding the Revolution in the birth of the democratic nation.<sup>5</sup>

The greater the threat to the Union, the more Whitman regressively drew on materials from the nation's "family romance." In his visionary poems of the 1850s, the crisis of the Union continually drives the poetic persona to a despair filled with oedipal and familial resonances, a despair that gives way to ecstatic prophecy and imaginary resolutions to the threat of betrayal. The Civil War he always dreaded, a fact in history, opened up an abyss beneath Whitman's deepest faith; but the Union victory would seem to close that abyss once and for all, with the painful emergence of the integral identity of the nation. After "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," in which the "dark

mother" enfolds Lincoln and all the dead of the Civil War in her arms, we find no more ecstatic descents to the underworld, no more crises of faith in Whitman's poetry. With the Inferno behind him, the poet retreats from further immersion in history's endless betrayals and denials.<sup>6</sup>

It is important to recognize, as Ed Folsom and Martin Klammer have, how closely identified the oppression (and defiance) of black slaves was to Whitman's fears about the "abyss" in the years before the war, when *Leaves of Grass* emerged.<sup>7</sup> In some of the earliest fragments known to have been written in Whitman's new free verse manner, the evocative figure of "Black Lucifer" takes shape—identified with a whale in the ocean whose "tap is death"—and seems to signify a fundamental challenge to American society. The passage, as it finally appears in 1855, provides a kind of premonition of the Civil War:<sup>8</sup>

I have been wronged . . . I am oppressed . . . I hate him that oppresses me,  
I will either destroy him, or he shall release me.  
Damn him! How he does defile me,  
How he informs against my brother and sister and takes pay for their blood,  
How he laughs when I look down the bend after the steamboat that carries away my  
woman.  
Now the vast bulk that is the whale's bulk . . . it seems mine,  
Warily, sportsman! Though I lie so sleepy and sluggish, my tap is death.<sup>9</sup>

I agree with those who find in Whitman's early poems for *Leaves of Grass* not only intense anxiety about the future of democracy but, paralleling that, an unusual level of empathy for black slaves. Such passages help explain Whitman's appeal to later African American authors.<sup>10</sup> If anything, it is the very uniqueness of his use of African Americans in the pre-war poetry that makes one wonder what happened between that period and Reconstruction. "Did Whitman's Black Lucifer go on, after emancipation, to become a citizen, to vote?" Ed Folsom asks. "The question seems faintly ridiculous, because Lucifer fails to evolve in Whitman's work; the poet creates no black characters, not a hint of a representation that offers a place or role for the freed slaves in reconstructed America."<sup>11</sup> Whitman's need for re-integration following the war may have something to do with this. If dominant notes of his 1855 and 1856 editions are rebellion and fear for the nation's future, in the wake of the "war of attempted secession" he had his heart set on other things.<sup>12</sup>

To Whitman, the war not only preserved the Union; it proved as well that American democracy was breeding what he termed a "race" of heroes in the common people—a new type of human being. This proof Whitman found through personal experience in the hospitals, in the way the boys and men (in Whitman's view at least) faced suffering and death without complaint or fear, in the way they expressed selfless af-



fection for each other and, indeed, for Walt Whitman—despite the incompetence, “feudalism,” and cruelty of many commissioned officers and politicians, the state-designated officials whom Whitman mostly despised.

### *Whitman's Family and the War*

Until the very end of 1862, Whitman had no direct experience of the war, for all his interest in it; and he never took up arms. (He was forty-two when it broke out.) Whitman remained in New York during the first year and more, occasionally visiting a hospital for the sick and wounded, and following the conflict in the newspapers. His brother George, on the other hand, enlisted early and would fight in many of the war's major battles yet emerge practically unscathed.

On December 16, 1862, the Whitmans learned that George had been wounded at Fredericksburg, Maryland, and Walt set off to find him. Thus it was a search for a family member that sent Whitman into the space of the hospitals that would be the center of his experience of the war—and in his mind the spiritual center of the nation itself, “America brought to hospital in her fair youth.”<sup>13</sup> After canvassing the hospitals in Washington, Walt found George still with his company across the Rappahannock from Fredericksburg, his cheek pierced by shrapnel but on the mend. Walt stayed with his brother slightly over a week, witnessed the dead on the battlefield, visited the wounded in hospitals, and toured the camps. Throughout the war, Whitman's mother depended on Walt to keep up with the movements of George's regiment as it fought through many harrowing battles, keeping the family in a constant state of anxiety.

In fact, throughout the war Whitman's family was in continual crisis, and he had to take on some of the functions of both a father and an intermediary (Walter Whitman senior having died about the time the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* went to press in 1855). After a brief stint in the army, his brother Andrew died of a painful throat disease in late 1863, leaving a young son and a wife five months pregnant, who soon after giving birth became one of Brooklyn's many wartime prostitutes.<sup>14</sup> Another brother, Ed, was always unable to care for himself, apparently afflicted with Down's Syndrome. Walt's one older brother, Jesse, went mad from syphilis in the course of the war, to the point of physically assaulting family members, until Walt finally came to New York and committed him to an insane asylum in December 1864. By that date, the family knew brother George was missing in action—actually a prisoner of war, as they later found out, at which point Walt would begin pulling strings to secure his release through prisoner exchange. Meanwhile, his sister Hannah's health broke down to the point that for five

months she could not stand up. The one dependable source of support other than Walt's aging mother and absent Walt himself was his brother Jeff, who was in danger of being drafted, an event that would spell, as Whitman wrote his mother, "the downfall almost of our entire family."<sup>15</sup> He began saving money to buy a substitute if necessary. This was a characteristic mediating role for Whitman, a role that took on larger significance in the context of his nursing and literary work. For the most part, Whitman observed the war and participated in it from the point-of-view of nurses behind the lines, between the battlefield and the homeplace. For Whitman would mediate between the battlefield and the civilian sphere, the living and the dead, the immediate bodily reality and its poetic inscription for all later generations. Such mediation took a variety of forms—physical and social activity, correspondence, journalism, and poetry.

### *Walt in Washington*

All the time that Whitman's own family was falling apart, with Walt constantly monitoring the situation through correspondence, he was in a sense creating surrogate relationships in Washington that helped sustain him. Here he settled into a rooming-house where an acquaintance, William Douglas O'Connor, was staying with his wife Nellie, and took meals with them. His relationships with these two became among the most important of his career as they formed the nucleus of his first circle of fervent supporters and, in the end, helped make him famous.

After finding a part-time job as a copyist in the army paymaster's office, Whitman was able to support himself and visit the soldiers in the hospitals. Soon he began to find his real calling in the war—providing aid, comfort, and encouragement to the sick, wounded, and dying. At the same time he wrote journalistic pieces for the New York papers describing the conditions of the hospitals and, more movingly, the emotional condition of the hospitalized. As M. Wynn Thomas has pointed out, from his first sight of the camp where he had found his brother George, Whitman "realized, with a shock that galvanized his whole being and irrevocably altered his imagination, that the soldiers and civilians lived worlds apart from each other, separated by a gulf of fearful unknowing."<sup>16</sup> Much of his work for the rest of the war was to connect these worlds.

Whitman's routine was to rest after his office-work, bathe, dress in fresh clothes, eat a good meal, and put in four to five hours touring the hospitals. He would often pack a knapsack with fruit, tobacco, paper, envelopes, and the like for individual distribution to the soldiers—materials chiefly paid for with money raised from relatives and friends. He entered the hospitals well-rested, sweet-scented, and cheerful in appear-

ance. He was not so much a "wound-dresser," as his poem of that title suggests, as he was a healer of the spirit, an affectionate comrade or "uncle," whose curative abilities were nonetheless deeply respected at a time when doctors' interventions often did more harm than good. Whitman never read his poetry to the men—in fact, he apparently never told them he was a poet—but he would recite Shakespeare or passages from the Bible. He would also hold the men's hands, kiss them, write letters for them. As William Douglas O'Connor put it: "His theory is that these men, far from home, lonely, sick at heart, need more than any thing some practical token that they are not forsaken, that someone feels a fatherly or brotherly interest in them."<sup>17</sup> His notebooks listing soldiers' names and their condition frequently also list the names and addresses of relatives whom Whitman intended to write. He would feed some of the "boys" their dinners. They would put their hands on his knee as they rested for hours at a time; he would kiss them as they went to sleep, and hold their hands as they died. He would write his mother about particular soldiers he was nursing and keep her up-to-date on their condition from week to week; and he would talk of his mother to the men, who would ask him to send her their love.

Many of the men looked upon Whitman explicitly as a father or uncle. Thus Elijah Fox, whom Whitman addressed as "son" and "comrade" addressed Whitman "Dear Father," and wrote, "Walt, you will be a second Father to me won't you, for my love for you is hardly less than my love for my natural parent."<sup>18</sup> When Whitman fell ill in July of 1864, broken down from the strain of his hospital work, Fox wrote to say he wished he could come to nurse him, for "I am sure no Father could have cared for their own child, better than you did me."<sup>19</sup>

Some of Whitman's most admirable prose can be found in letters informing parents of the exact circumstances and manner of the death of a son. In one extraordinary letter to the mother and father of Erastus Haskell, Whitman recounts the young man's suffering, describing his manners and speech and gestures through the period of sickness and death. The letter then shifts from narrative to a direct address to the dead: "Poor dear son, though you were not my son, I felt to love you as a son, what short time I saw you sick & dying here—it is well as it is, perhaps better—for who knows whether he is not better off, that patient & sweet young soul, to go, than we are to stay? So farewell, dear boy—it was my opportunity to be with you in your last rapid days of death—no chance as I have said to do any thing particular, for nothing [could be done—only you did not lay] here & die among strangers without having one at hand who loved you dearly, & to whom you gave your dying kiss."<sup>20</sup> Here Whitman takes up a position between the living and the dead, in communion with both, between the strangers and the parents. Mr. Haskell's gratitude for this letter drove him to look up

Whitman's family in Brooklyn and visit them. On more than this occasion Whitman undertook the role that Wynn Thomas has aptly called "surrogate mourner of the dead," holding a vigil over the lifeless body and keeping remembrance when family members could not.<sup>21</sup>

Such experiences, melded with stories he heard of actual events after battles, inform such poems as "Vigil Strange I Kept on the Field One Night":

Vigil strange I kept on the field one night;

When you my son and my comrade dropt at my side that day,

One look I but gave which your dear eyes return'd with a look I shall never forget,

One touch of your hand to mine O boy, reach'd up as you lay on the ground,

Then onward I sped in the battle, the even-contested battle,

Till late in the night reliev'd to the place at last again I made my way,

Found you in death so cold dear comrade, found your body son of responding kisses,  
(never again on earth responding,)

...

Vigil of silence, love and death, vigil for you my son and my soldier,

...

Vigil final for you brave boy, (I could not save you, swift was your death,

I faithfully loved you and cared for you living, I think we shall surely meet again,).

<sup>22</sup>

...

Whitman gave his greatest attention to the young men without family or companions near, the most forlorn, and the emotional rewards for him were extraordinary. To William S. Davis he wrote, "I find often young men, some hardly more than children in age yet—so good, so sweet, so brave, so decorous, I could not feel them nearer to me if my own sons or young brothers— Some cases even I could not tell any one, how near to me, from their yearning ways & their sufferings— it is comfort & delight to me to minister to them, to sit by them—some so wind themselves around one's heart, & will be kissed at parting at night just like children—though veterans of two years of battles & camp life."<sup>23</sup> Whitman's family-like relationships with the soldiers created hopes in him for long-term bonds. Such relationships take familial intimacy beyond the traditional nuclear family to long-term relationships between men who live together bound by love. To Thomas Sawyer he wrote, "I don't know how you feel about it, but it is the wish of my heart to have your friendship, and also that if you should come safe out of this war, we should come together again in some place where we could make our living, and be true comrades and never be separated while life lasts."<sup>24</sup> And to Elijah Douglas Fox: "Dearest son, it would be more pleasure if we could be together just in quiet, in some plain way of living, with some good employment & reasonable income, where I could have you often with me, than all the dissipations & amusements of this great city— O I hope things may work so that we can yet have each other's society—

for I cannot bear the thought of being separated from you."<sup>25</sup>

Mental and emotional collapses brought on by the hospital work forced Whitman on two occasions to go home to Brooklyn to recuperate. From there he sent stories of civilian and domestic life, stitching together the home and the hospitals, mediating between them—"My loving comrades, I am scribbling all this in my room in my mother's house."<sup>26</sup> He shared stories of the soldiers with his mother, and when at home would write to the soldiers in the hospitals tender letters sending his mother's love as well as his own. He promised in October 1863, "Mother, when I come home I will show you some of the letters I get from mothers, sisters, fathers &c.. They will make you cry."<sup>27</sup> Most wrenching of all were the cases of soldiers dying entirely unknown, as in the case of a young man who died on a stretcher being taken to a hospital ward, with no identification and no one to identify him: "Mother, it is enough to rack one's heart, such things—very likely his folks will never know in the world what has become of him—poor poor child, for he appeared as though he could be but 18."<sup>28</sup> The death of an unknown soldier, without family or friends or anyone even able to establish his identity—an identity absolutely obliterated, without witness—throws the language of human meaning and connection into crisis.<sup>29</sup> Such painful reflections would lead Whitman to further ruminations threatening any redemptive notions concerning the war; the callous indifference to the sufferings of the common soldiers particularly saddened and infuriated Whitman: "even the dying soldier's money stolen from his body by some scoundrel attendant, or from sick ones, even from under his head, which is a common thing—& then the agony I see everyday, I get almost frightened at the world."<sup>30</sup> These are feelings, by the way, that Whitman did not record in his poetry.

### *Poems and Epistles*

Although he left out of his published poems the most damnable abuses he witnessed, Whitman tried to imbue his poetry of the war with the emotional intimacy and immediacy that the trauma in the hospitals had demanded of him. *Drum-Taps* is saturated with the intimacy and actual rhythms and phrasing, as well as scenes and images, we find in Whitman's notes and correspondence of the time. In fact, as Jerome Loving has pointed out, "Some of the greatest poems of *Drum-Taps* were conceived near the very battlefield they effectively describe."<sup>31</sup> According to Loving, both "Vigil Strange I Kept on the Field One Night" and "A Sight in Camp in the Daybreak Gray and Dim" are based on a Christmas night Whitman spent at Fredericksburg, Virginia, when he was looking for his brother. Moreover, most of the *Drum-Taps* poems were never revised after their first publication (although their positions in *Leaves of Grass* did change over time)—which makes them very unusual in the Whitman

canon. Whitman began drafting some of the poems in the same notebooks in which he took down the names of soldiers he met in the hospitals or recorded his activities of the day.

As he tried in his nursing and in his letter-writing to mediate between the soldiers' sphere and that of their (and his) families, so in his poetry he tried, paradoxically, to eliminate the conventional distance inherent in aesthetic mediation, to make the poems not substitute for reality but somehow keep the war's reality real for all time, to bridge the gap between that cluster of years and all later ones. In this attempt he knew he could not succeed. Yet in Whitman's war writing, taken altogether, one finds a peculiar series of linkages between the actual experience; the note taken at the hospital, blood-stained and tear-spotted; the letter written to a parent or spouse; and the poem, often itself a sort of epistle—to whom?

Civilians can never, Whitman asserts, know the actuality of the suffering bodies; even so, he tried to provoke understanding, at times with graphic descriptions, as in "The Wound-Dresser":

From the stump of the arm, the amputated hand,  
I undo the clotted lint, remove the slough, wash off the matter and blood,  
Back on his pillow the soldier bends with curv'd neck and side-falling head,  
His eyes are closed, his face is pale, he dares not look on the bloody stump,  
And has not yet look'd on it.<sup>32</sup>

But what finally cannot be represented, most importantly, for Whitman is a kind and depth of emotion that is both too traumatic to recapture and inestimably dear. It is the bond of one human being to another—mother, father, brother, son, loving comrade—revealing its primal value at the point when death intervenes, fused with a cause so sacred that the contradiction threatens to open up an ethical abyss. One ends up fighting for the very meaning of those primary bonds of attachment that the work of battle perpetually annihilates—unless this world connects with one beyond, unless identity and attachment survive.

Even when the emotion concatenates around a battle flag, what the flag represents is more than nationality or a political principle but simultaneously a bond of human attachment, of comrades to each other, often inflected with the feeling of a child for its mother, the flag a substitute for the mother (as a child's blanket is) and this feeling thoroughly (perhaps perversely, pathetically) absorbed into the sense of the cause. Whitman himself was given a little flag by one of the wounded who expected to die—the flag had been captured by the "Rebs" and then rescued in a little skirmish that "cost 3 men's lives," "all just for the name of getting their little banner back again—this man that got it was very badly wounded, & they let him keep it—I was with him a good deal, he wanted to give me something he said, he didn't expect to live, so he gave me the little banner as a keepsake."<sup>33</sup>

In "Song of the Banner at Daybreak," the poet imagines a banner, associated with the mother, speaking to a child and calling him to leave his home for war, over the father's objections:

So loved—O you banner leading the day with stars brought from the night!  
Valueless, object of eyes, over all and demanding all—(absolute owner of all)—O  
banner and pennant!  
I too leave the rest—great as it is, it is nothing—houses, machines are nothing—I see  
them not,  
I see but you, O warlike pennant! O banner so broad, with stripes, I sing you only,  
Flapping there in the wind.<sup>34</sup>

The connection Whitman felt among the soldiers between primary bonds of attachment and the banner or cause may explain the strange fact that in the original *Drum-Taps*, just before "Vigil Strange," Whitman included a poem called "Mother and Babe," of only two lines: "I see the sleeping babe, nestling the breast of its mother; / The sleeping mother and babe—hush'd, I study them long and long."<sup>35</sup> Seemingly incongruous in a collection of war poems, it is the mother-child bond that in fact irradiates all of the *Drum-Taps* cluster with its unusual combination of tenderness and terror.

And paradox. For what bond challenges the authority of the nation or the cause over the body of the child more radically than that of the mother? So Whitman himself seems to acknowledge in the poem "Come Up from the Fields Father," in which he imagines a midwestern farm family receiving just the sort of letter Whitman himself often wrote about a sick or wounded boy/soldier:

Open the envelope quickly,  
O this is not our son's writing, yet his name is sign'd,  
O a strange hand writes for our dear son, O stricken mother's soul!  
All swims before her eyes, flashes with black, she catches the main words only,  
Sentences broken, *gunshot wound in the breast, cavalry skirmish, taken to hospital,*  
*At present low, but will soon be better.*

Ah now the single figure to me,  
Amid all teeming and wealthy Ohio with all its cities and farms,  
Sickly white in the face and dull in the head, very faint,  
By the jamb of a door leans.

...  
Alas poor boy, he will never be better, (nor may-be needs to be better, that brave and  
simple soul,)  
While they stand at home at the door he is dead already,  
The only son is dead.

...  
But the mother needs to be better,

...  
In the midnight waking, weeping, longing with one deep longing,  
O that she might withdraw unnoticed, silent from life escape and withdraw,  
To follow, to seek, to be with her dear dead son.<sup>36</sup>



The greatest heroism of the war, Whitman sometimes stated, was that of mothers such as his own, often not knowing for weeks or months on end the fate of their children whom they knew to have been engaged in harrowing battles.<sup>37</sup>

For all his faith in the cause, Whitman seeks, as John Carlos Rowe has written, "a more profound justification for the human damage he witnesses" than patriotism or transcendental idealism can provide.<sup>38</sup> He finds it in qualities of feeling. If the war appears as an infernal experience, it is also one that evokes depths of emotion and filial affections that no peacetime pleasures can match. For Whitman, it seems to confirm a profundity of human attachment undreamed of before the war, and, to his peculiar way of thinking, a proof of the theory of democracy.

### *Assassination and Suture*

The Saturday after Good Friday in 1865, Whitman and his family learned of Lincoln's assassination on one of the poet's visits home. They literally read the newspaper aloud to each other, passing it back and forth across his mother's kitchen table. Walt and his mother, Louisa, did not eat that day but sat silently as the sky darkened and the rain fell in dreary accompaniment to their sorrow. Whitman came quickly to believe that the assassination of the President encapsulated the entire meaning of the war and proved its sacred quality: "The whole involved, baffling, multiform whirl of the Secession period," he would write, came to a head in that single "fierce deed."<sup>39</sup> It proved the universal significance of the war; it was democracy's originary moment, its rite of crucifixion. Whitman ceased thinking of the nation as having been born during the Revolution; he began to see the Civil War and assassination as America's true "parturition and delivery"; the nation had been "born again, consistent with itself."<sup>40</sup> In all his post-war work, Democracy and America are figured as a Mother. Thus was the suffering redeemed.

But what if Whitman's reading of the War, and with it Lincoln's death, were wrong? If the poet had deceived himself and democracy had not been truly and permanently saved, then America, he believed, would be a spectacular failure and his life's work wasted—both nation and poet victims of "a destiny . . . equivalent in its real world to that of the fabled damned," as he wrote in *Democratic Vistas*.<sup>41</sup> Fear of such self-deceit is one of the keys to Whitman's later years. He avoided any radical questioning of the motion of history, which helps explain the dramatic shift in his poetry away from personal crisis and ecstasy to stoic detachment, reminiscence, and meditation.

In incorporating *Drum-Taps* into *Leaves of Grass* and, throughout the last quarter-century of his life, expanding as well as reorganizing that work into a cathedral-like form, Whitman gave the Civil War a central position.<sup>42</sup> He devoted the heart of his autobiography, *Specimen*



*Days*, to his memoranda from the war period. Yet Whitman does not provide a comprehensive view of the war; most glaring is an almost total absence of reflection upon slavery and emancipation, except for the awkward "Ethiopia Saluting the Colors" (which, nonetheless, would be much admired by some black writers of later years).

This may be connected with his view of the war as a "family" drama; the ideology of "race" as "family" made it impossible for Whitman to conceive of the Civil War as centrally involving African Americans (although it must be said that he showed interest in the involvement of black troops, and registered the evidence of their competence and courage). To Whitman, African Americans were beside the point, for the point was a "family" crisis, and Whitman could not think of black people as part of his "family." As Ed Folsom has pointed out, in the text of a speech late in life that spoke in the warmest tones of national reconciliation, Whitman wrote, "To night I would say one word for that South—the whites. I do not wish to say one word and will not say one word against the blacks—but the blacks can never be to me what the whites are. Below all political relations, even the deepest, are still deeper, personal, physiological and *emotional* ones, the whites are my brothers & I love them."<sup>43</sup> The presence of African Americans in the national household is not addressed but generally covered up in Whitman's rhetoric of national solidarity and healing. Just what African Americans had to do with the coming of the war (dreadfully hinted at in the "Black Lucifer" passage quoted earlier) is completely avoided by a narrative of fratricide in which the "brothers" are all white—as are the "fathers" over whose heroic legacy they quarrel, under the eyes of the surviving Mother, democracy. Certainly, Whitman believed slavery was evil, but it was only one of the great threats to democracy that the war, in Whitman's view, addressed. The reintegration of the national household takes place with blacks basically left out, or forming a mysterious puzzle. A hint of this problem occurs in Whitman's description of troops on review in 1864, passing under Lincoln's gaze: "The 9<sup>th</sup> Corps made a very fine show indeed—there were I should think five very full regiments of new black troops under Gen Ferrero, they looked & marched very well—It looked funny to see the President standing with his hat off to them just the same as the rest as they passed by."<sup>44</sup> In the spring of 1867, Whitman would write his mother, "Washington is filled with *darkies*. The men and women & wenches swarm in all directions—(I am not sure but the North is like the man that won the elephant in a raffle)."<sup>45</sup>

Only one poem in the original *Drum-Taps* cluster—"Pioneers! O Pioneers!," which looks to the settlement of the West as a way of transcending sectional animosity, turning battle-axes into woodsman's tools—included any reference to slavery (but not specifically to black people).<sup>46</sup> In 1867, Whitman wrote the poem "Ethiopia Saluting the Colors"; much later, in 1881, he added it to the *Drum-Taps* cluster. It is

one of the most awkward poems he ever wrote, and completely alien to his poetic style. Some critics have assailed the poem for stereotypical description, but what is more striking to me is the dread implicit in the questions with which the poem closes, six years after the Civil War had actually ended. "What is it fateful woman, so bleary, hardly human? / Why wag your head with turban bound, yellow, red and green? / Are the things so strange and marvelous you see or have seen?"<sup>47</sup> These words, it is true, are ostensibly spoken by a persona, a white soldier in Sherman's army; nonetheless, much is revealed in Whitman's awkwardness and irresolution here—an irresolution quite atypical of the postwar poet, who often expressed the belief that democracy in America had nothing more to fear, having, in his opinion, defeated its internal demons.<sup>48</sup> That the whole epic story of black Americans' experience of the conflict lies outside Whitman's reach reveals much not only about himself but about the limits of the white poetic imagination as the nation emerged from its most traumatic experience, intent on healing, on sewing up its wounds.<sup>49</sup>

We see in Whitman's work in this respect, and in the nation, an example of the sort of "suturing" that has been described recently within film and narrative theory. Surgical suturing reconnects torn or cut flesh, after an operation or in the repair of a wound. But out of Lacanian psychoanalysis and related theories has developed the notion that, in the words of Robert Leigh Davis, "works of art expose and then cover over the inadequacies of their subject. They promote an awareness of wounding in order to relieve it, to suture it, in a way that stabilizes the viewer or reader within a pre-existing social order. The more intense the threat of negation and loss, the more intense the desire for closure."<sup>50</sup> The issue of African Americans' relation to the American household could not really be a part of the calculus for Whitman, for they belonged to another "family."<sup>51</sup> He rarely imagined them in relation to the family romance, and the reintegration of the country after the war meant for him chiefly the reintegration of Southern and Northern whites. Indeed, during the war itself, although Whitman was not unfriendly to black soldiers in the hospitals, he generally did not minister to them; and he avoided the "Contraband" hospitals: "There is a limit to one's sinews & endurance & sympathies, &c.," he wrote his mother.<sup>52</sup> While the war gradually revealed for some white people, like Lincoln, the profound significance of the existence of African Americans as slaves or ex-slaves within the nation, for others this was an issue best avoided. And so the healing of the wounds of the war came at the expense of probing further the nature of problems that, as Whitman's pre-war verse occasionally hinted, had made the war irrepressible.

Joel Williamson, among others, has pointed out that the Civil War resulted in a crucial drama in the development of American racial culture, for one of its results was to precipitate a formalization of racial difference on a bipolar model and on a national scale. Differences by

state concerning racial identification disappeared, anti-miscegenation laws spread, and the "Race War" moved North in the early twentieth century, which in turn nourished a growing sense of black national identity as distinct from white American identity.<sup>53</sup> The correlation of "race" with "family"—or rather, the subordination of family to race, the utter suppression of potential "family" relations that crossed the color line—became increasingly adamant and nationalized, setting up the basic vectors of modern American racial formation. The question of whether the war was fought over equality and black emancipation or over states' rights versus national union was settled in favor of the latter. And we have lived with the consequences of that answer—a failure of imagination, of love and recognition—ever since.

*Indiana University, Bloomington*

## NOTES

- 1 Horace Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, 9 vols. (various publishers, 1914-1996), 3:95.
- 2 Whitman, "To Thee Old Cause," in *Leaves of Grass*, Comprehensive Reader's Edition, ed. Harold W. Blodgett and Sculley Bradley (New York: New York University Press, 1965), 5.
- 3 See George Hutchinson, *The Ecstatic Whitman: Literary Shamanism and the Crisis of the Union* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1986), 1-16.
- 4 "The Sleepers," *LG*, 429.
- 5 For further discussion of the filiopiety in Whitman's imaginary relationship to the revolutionary generation, see Hutchinson, *Ecstatic Whitman*, 1-8. A work that sheds much light on the subject generally is George B. Forgie, *Patricide in the House Divided* (New York: Norton, 1979).
- 6 George Hutchinson, "Whitman's Confidence Game: The 'Good Gray Poet' and the Civil War," *South Central Review* 7 (1990), 20-35.
- 7 Martin Klammer, *Whitman, Slavery, and the Emergence of Leaves of Grass* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995); and Ed Folsom, "Lucifer and Ethiopia: Whitman, Race, and Poetics before the Civil War and After," in *A Historical Guide to Walt Whitman*, ed. David S. Reynolds (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 46-53. See also Folsom, "Walt Whitman's Working Notes for the First Edition of *Leaves of Grass*," *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 16 (1998), 91.
- 8 Hutchinson, *Ecstatic Whitman*, 66.
- 9 Whitman, *Complete Poetry and Collected Prose*, ed. Justin Kaplan (New York: Library of America, 1982), 113.
- 10 In some poems such as "To You (Whoever Your Are)" he uses the condition of the slave as representative of the condition of his audience. The "you" of his songs, if it is to apply to all readers, must apply to slaves, those most graphically denied the right to self-determination. Eschewing pity for admiration and love, the poet projects upon his reader a spiritual freedom that will ensure self-fulfillment: "The hopples fall from your ankles, you find an unfailing sufficiency, / Old or young, male or female,

rude, low, rejected by the rest, whatever you are promulges itself" (*LG*, 235). I discuss passages like this and Whitman's appeal to black modernist poets in "Langston Hughes and the 'Other' Whitman," in *The Continuing Presence of Walt Whitman: The Life After the Life*, ed. Robert K. Martin (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1992), 16-27.

11 Folsom, "Lucifer and Ethiopia," p. 52

12 Christopher Beach comments that "symbolically, Whitman turns increasingly to a vision of 'reconciliation' that would unite the white 'brothers' of North and South while obliterating the black race entirely" (*The Politics of Distinction: Whitman and the Discourses of Nineteenth-Century America* [Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996], 97).

13 Whitman to Ralph Waldo Emerson, January 17, 1863, in *The Correspondence*, ed. Edwin Haviland Miller (New York: New York University Press, 1961), 1:69. A fine article on the importance of George Whitman to Walt's response to the war is M. Wynn Thomas, "Fratricide and Brotherly Love: Whitman and the Civil War," in Ezra Greenspan, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Walt Whitman* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 27-44.

14 Jerome Loving, *Walt Whitman: The Song of Himself* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 11. Other excellent sources on Whitman's family in the Civil War include Gay Wilson Allen, *The Solitary Singer* (1955, rev. 1967; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985); and David S. Reynolds, *Walt Whitman's America: A Cultural Biography* (New York: Knopf, 1995). For the most part, for biographical information I draw in this essay from Loving and from Whitman's correspondence of the period.

15 Whitman to Louisa Van Velsor Whitman, July 15, 1863, in *Corr.*, 1:117-118.

16 Thomas, 31.

17 Quoted in Loving, 265.

18 Quoted in Loving, 277.

19 Quoted in Loving, 188, note 72.

20 Whitman to Mr. And Mrs. S. B. Haskell, August 10, 1863, in *Corr.*, 1:129.

21 Thomas, 35.

22 *LG*, 303-304.

23 Whitman to William S. Davis, October 1, 1863, in *Corr.*, 1:152-153.

24 *Corr.*, 1:93.

25 Whitman to Elijah Douglass Fox, November 21, 1863, in *Corr.*, 1:187-188.

26 Whitman to Lewis K. Brown and others, November 9, 1863, in *Corr.*, 1:181.

27 Whitman to Louisa Van Velsor Whitman, October 27, 1863, in *Corr.*, 1:173.

28 Whitman to Louisa Van Velsor Whitman, March 29, 1864, in *Corr.*, 1: 205.

29 Thomas, 35; and Keith V. Comer, *Strange Meetings: Walt Whitman, Wilfred Owen, and the Poetry of War* (Lund: Lund University Press, 1996), 23.

30 Whitman to Louisa Van Velsor Whitman, March 29, 1864, in *Corr.*, 1:205.

31 Loving, 19.

32 *LG*, 310.

33 *Corr.*, 1:210.

34 *LG*, 290-291.

35 Whitman, "Mother and Babe," in *Drum-Taps* (New York, 1865), 41.

36 *LG*, 303.

37 See, e.g., Whitman to Ellen O'Connor, November 15, 1863, in *Corr.*, 1:183.

38 Rowe, "Whitman's Body Poetic," in Kathryne V. Lindberg and Joseph G. Kronick, ed., *America's Modernisms: Revaluing the Canon* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1996), 175.

39 Whitman, "Death of Abraham Lincoln," in Roy P. Basler, ed., *Walt Whitman's Memoranda During the War [ & ] Death of Abraham Lincoln* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1962), 11.

40 "Death of Abraham Lincoln," 12.

41 *Democratic Vistas*, in Mark Van Doren, ed., *The Portable Walt Whitman* (New York: Viking, 1973), 380.

42 Hutchinson, "Whitman's Confidence Game," 31-32.

43 Quoted in Folsom, "Lucifer and Ethiopia," 82, from Edward F. Grier, ed., *Notebooks and Unpublished Prose Manuscripts* (New York: New York University Press, 1984), 6:2160.

44 Whitman to Louisa Van Velsor Whitman, April 26, 1864, in *Corr.*, 1:211-212.

45 *Corr.*, 1:323.

46 The reference to "all the masters with their slaves" (*LG*, 231) in "Pioneers" does not clearly include these persons among the pioneers themselves, but seems to refer to them as among the groups who are urging the pioneers—the "beloved race" of "resolute children"—onward.

47 *LG*, 318-319.

48 For an intensive investigation of the poem and its context, see Ed Folsom's discussion in "Lucifer and Ethiopia," 53-77. One thing Folsom's extensive analysis and historical reconstruction suggests to me is how thoroughly Whitman sublimated the African American experience and presence through the figure of this one aged woman. Folsom's careful research into the dramatic contemporary accounts about African Americans shadowing Sherman's march in South Carolina suggests that Whitman could not have been ignorant of the subject.

49 For an influential argument about the relationship of racism and racial ambivalence to the inability of American authors to adequately address the Civil War, see Daniel Aaron, *The Unwritten War: American Writers and the Civil War* (New York: Knopf, 1973).

50 Robert Leigh Davis, *Whitman and the Romance of Medicine* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 127. Davis ingeniously applies theories of suture to Whitman's work to demonstrate that while Whitman seeks to heal and stabilize identity, he "affirms the value of what cannot be fully treated, sutured, comprehended, or closed off." Unfortunately, it seems to me, when it came to nationality and race, Whitman fell short of such affirmation in the post-war period. Luke Mancuso, I should add, has argued otherwise in *The Strange Sad War Revolving: Walt Whitman, Recon-*

*struction, and the Emergence of Black Citizenship, 1865-1876* (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1997).

51 Ed Folsom (65-66) points out that Whitman wrote positively in 1862 of "Aunty Robinson, a colored nurse" in an article on the Broadway Hospital; the "Aunty" moniker in this case I take to be typical of a racially specific form of respectful usage at the time, applied chiefly to mature, respectable, and non-threatening blacks, who generally were not addressed as "Mr." and "Mrs." by whites.

52 Whitman to Louisa Van Velsor Whitman, July 7, 1863, in *Corr.*, 1:115.

53 Joel Williamson, *New People: Miscegenation and Mulattoes in the United States* (New York: The Free Press, 1980).